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AGRICULTURAL ENGLISH

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Twenty-five years ago the colleges of agriculture were fighting for their existence. The idea that it took an education to farm was ridiculed and laughed at. Engineers, lawyers, doctors, and bankers failed to see that it took just as much technical training to raise corn, wheat, or cabbage, as it took to build a bridge, draw up a contract, or make a loan. Today things have changed. Instead of fighting for life, agriculture is actually outstripping the other professions. Today the engineering schools, the law schools, and theological seminaries are hunting for students, while agricultural colleges are almost ready to turn men away from their doors because more are coming than the most hopeful have dared to make provision for. The boys who know are entering our agricultural colleges today. The brains of the college are to be found in the agronomy laboratory, at the experiment plot, or in the judging pavilion. Agriculture is here to stay—the biggest and most important thing in the curriculum of the American college and university.

Agricultural study has made such vast strides in these past twenty-five years that many have utterly failed to keep abreast of it. Along with its growth there has been a phenomenal growth of agricultural writing. Books by the scores and hundreds have been written. Government, state, college, experiment station—all have vied with each other in putting the new-found science before the farmers and the interested people of the country. More than these, there has been the growth of papers and magazines for the farmer. There are general papers, scientific papers, breeding papers, farm papers, cattle papers, horse papers—papers about hogs, dairy, poultry, the household—time and space is not sufficient to name even the different classes of papers, let alone the names of even a few specific ones. There is no science, business,

industry, or profession that is making the effort that agriculture is making today to get information before the great mass of interested people.

Many of the books, bulletins, and magazine articles are written by men who are engaged in the business of agriculture. The most of these writers, whether professors, investigators, or staff specialists, are graduates of our agricultural colleges. There is no other place from whence they can come, no other place that makes a business of developing such writers. The thing I want to get at in this article is this: Are these colleges and universities taking advantage of the opportunity offered to train these writers?

Writing is, and should be, under the supervision of the department of English. The question I want to ask is whether the departments of English have kept pace with the growth of agricultural writing. Has provision been made in the curriculum, and more than this, in the teaching, for the agricultural student? Have we been progressive? The answer must be in the negative. The departments of English have not fully realized what has been happening in this new field. We are still working away at things of the past that have no practical relation to the great educational changes of the last few years. We have been going on in the same old rut, teaching farmers how to get culture, how to write glowing descriptions, how to get local color into narratives; when instead we should be setting these farmers to putting practical knowledge into clear, concise English. We should be teaching them how to describe the workings of an ensilage cutter or a milking machine, how to relate the life history of a grasshopper or a liverfluke. Many of the men who have come from the doors of our colleges have stepped out with almost no technical training in the art of writing on agricultural subjects. They give as the reason that much of the time spent in the composition class was time lost, as far as their practical writing was concerned. They learned to write in college when they wrote papers in their technical courses, or when they wrote articles for the student agricultural paper. If they did not learn it in this way, they learned by hard experience after they were out in the world.

Many an instructor of English who has had the teaching of agricultural students under his charge will disagree with the above statements. What I say is rather relatively than absolutely true. Let me ask a question or two. Are we doing as much for our agricultural students as we are for our engineers, our lawyers, or our liberal arts students? Has any effort been made to work out a system of teaching English that will give students training by using the materials from the things in which they are interested? Has there been any special effort to discuss the problem of teaching agricultural English at the meetings and gatherings of councils and associations? Has any effort been made to write a textbook for agricultural English? Have the men from the dairy, agronomy, or animal-husbandry departments been called in to advise and co-operate with us? A careful investigation of these questions would result in a negative answer to most of them.

At a recent meeting of the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education, much time was devoted to a discussion of how to teach English to engineers. Magazine articles are being written on the same topic. Teachers put in hours at their conventions listening to papers and round-table discussions of how to teach this or that kind of English. But we have been silent, and the magazines have been for the most part dumb, on the subject of English for the farmer and agriculturalist. If there is any adequate textbook for the teaching of agricultural English, it must be still under the proverbial bushel. It has not yet come to light. If there has been co-operation between the English department and the instructors in the technical agricultural department, very little has been said about it.

Many of our colleges are realizing that agricultural journalism is a future field and are putting in courses to take care of the demand for skilled agricultural writers. Work such as is offered at the Iowa State College, the University of Illinois, or the University of Wisconsin, is just the thing that is needed. These courses are open, however, in most cases, to advanced students only. Not being required, they are elected by just those few who expect to specialize in that line of work. They do not touch the great majority of graduates, who go out not realizing the amount of

writing they may be called on to do ere they are many months away from the college doors. What I have in mind is not this work of agricultural journalism, but rather the teaching of writing to all agricultural students who take the first college course in composition. I do not intend here to furnish an abridged edition of an agricultural English textbook. I do want to make a few pointed suggestions, based on my own experience; and I want to suggest a method that has proved successful.

The first thing to be done is to make a separation. If agricultural students are to be taught, teach agricultural students only. Do not put them in a section with future engineers or lawyers. Then give these sections into the control of instructors who know something about agriculture. One reason why agricultural students have been neglected in the past is because the teachers of English have known little about the work that their students were doing in their other courses. How can an instructor hope to get the best results when he is not in sympathy with his students, and not interested in their work?

Not long ago I heard of an English instructor, who has been teaching agricultural students, who had to have explained to him what a stock-judging team was. He has never lived on a farm and knows little about country life or conditions. If the man who aspires to teach agricultural English was not born on the farm, or has never spent several years of his life there, he ought at least to be thoroughly acquainted with agricultural material. If he does not know it, he should make an earnest and conscientious effort to learn it. The instructor who wants to hold the respect of his students ought to know a corn planter when he sees one. He ought to know a Jersey cow from a Holstein. He ought to know how to plow and plant, how to sow and reap. Knowing such things, he can better appreciate the efforts of his students and can sympathize with them as he meets them on a common ground. The instructor who knows these things has begun to solve the problem of teaching farmer boys how to write clear, virile, forceful English.

And yet many of us are trying to teach such students, knowing little of these things. Can it be any wonder that we have not realized all of the possibilities in agricultural English? I do not

mean to say that to be a successful teacher one should have a technical knowledge of agricultural subjects, such as agronomy or bacteriology. Not at all. What I do mean to say is that the successful teachers ought to have a sympathetic knowledge of the subject and of the students.

Textbooks on agricultural exposition there are none. The wide-awake teacher must be his own textbook. This year I am using in my agricultural classes a textbook that is supposed to be one of the best of its kind ever written. It is. It was written by the English department of a great engineering school and it is intended for engineers. The result has been that for the most part we have been unable to use the book. We use it for the theory but hardly ever touch the illustrative specimens. And we use very little theory. What is needed is more practice and less theory. All the theory needed can be given by the instructor in a few brief lectures. Some day someone will write a textbook that will have in it the proper things for an agricultural course, but until such has been written, it is better to do without.

In teaching English to agricultural students, have your students write about agricultural subjects. They must be able to use the subject-matter they collect from their other classes as laboratory material in English. Get the students to working with things that they know about and are interested in, and the inevitable result will be that they will do better. The usual list of subjects for exposition writing in the usual textbook on composition is entirely unsuitable for agricultural students. Give them live, up-to-date subjects—things that they know and care about. I solved this problem by having the students themselves hand in lists of topics that they were interested in. I urged them to write about their personal affairs, to explain the plans for their own ranch, stock-breeding farm, or cotton plantation. Careful reading of farm papers, agricultural bulletins, and books gave me a large list of topics. I talked with a number of practical farmers. A letter to various instructors in other departments asking for a list of theme subjects dealing with their special field brought me very courteous replies and a great wealth of material that a layman such as I might never have found. A trip over the campus and a prying

into various buildings and laboratories added many things to my list. I urged the students to turn in to me technical papers due in other courses, to be graded as English themes, before they were submitted to the other instructor. Taking all of these various means, I accumulated a great mass of material for work in expository theme-writing. It was both practical and interesting.

Men come to college to think, to train their brains, not to cram a great number of unrelated facts into their heads. The various courses that are given to them are but a furnishing of the material for thinking. English is not an end in itself; it is only a means to an end. A student is taught English composition in order that he may use it in his other work; not that he may know the theory of the subject in itself. The place where an agricultural student would be taught to think is in this course in English composition. There it is that he must be taught how to arrange ideas in logical order, how to analyze his impressions, and how to make the best use of his stock of accumulated knowledge. The primary aim then in a composition course is to train students to think. If this is so, then the English instructor must have them actually think. His problem is to get them to do this. There is just one sure method. That is by oral composition.

In beginning work in oral composition, I went to some trouble to assign students definite topics from the list I had already collected. Theme assignments were made out as long as three or four weeks in advance, so that the student might have plenty of time in getting ready his talk. No two students were assigned to the same topic. No student was assigned to two topics similar in substance. A regular program was made out for each day in the week and this was posted in advance. With twenty-five in a section, and four hours in a week, each man would get a chance to give one talk a week, from five to ten minutes in length. The result was that the class heard twenty-five interesting talks on as many different topics. One thing was insisted on. These talks were not to be written in advance. An outline was required, however, as brief or extended as the pupil cared to make. This last insured careful organization of material.

At the end of the week, these talks were written out and handed in as weekly themes. Thus each student made one talk and wrote one theme a week—no more. Where the student secured his material for this talk and theme I did not especially care—just as long as it was authentic. It might come from his own experience, from his textbooks, from magazine articles, or from bulletins. In some cases it had to be secured by interviewing instructors.

At first the students thought that oral themes were a joke. In about a week they began to change their minds. Instead of criticizing, I turned this matter over to the students themselves. When one fellow made a talk that was uninteresting, illogical, or inaccurate, there were twenty-four critics waiting to tell him about it when he had finished. With a suggestion now and then, the class was able to do efficient work in this respect. Nor were they slow to praise. When one of their number made an excellent talk, the rest could appreciate it as well as I could. An extra good talk was often applauded. The result was that each and every one was incited to do better work. A man knew that if he did poor work the whole class would know about it—and tell him about it. To say that interest was stirred up would be putting it mildly. Enthusiasm is the word to use.

Besides interest, there are other advantages in the oral method. The poorer students are induced to do better work. After three or four weeks of this method, I had no poor students. Not that all were doing the same quality of work—there had been a general improvement all around. The greatest result came in the quality of the written work turned in. Themes were written that had substance as well as correct form. The form too was better than before. There was all that might be desired in unity, coherence, and emphasis. In addition, they had an interest that made it a pleasure to read them. Many were of sufficient quality to be published in the student agricultural paper. The editor of the paper, quick to see the results of this system, has actually published a number of them, and is planning to use many more.

How do the students like this method? I have said that they were enthusiastic. One made the remark that he never knew English was a real study until he began this method. Another

declared, "This is just the thing we Aggies need." In talks with the students, both in class and out, I have found just one who was opposed to it. On questioning him, I discovered that he was not an agricultural student, but was taking a literature course and had wandered into the wrong section by mistake. This plan has awakened the students to the fact that they need to know how to use their mother tongue. It has appealed to them as something practical. They are beginning to see the relation between knowing how to write and earning their bread and butter after they are out of school.

I soon found that my students were going to one source more than any other for the material for their talks. This brings me to the one important thing I want to say—to the thing that caused me to write this article. This source was the agricultural magazine. These students were going to such magazines as *Breeder's Gazette*, *Wallace's Farmer*, *Kimball's Dairyman*, and more than any other, to the *Country Gentleman*. More than half of the oral talks given during the first four weeks came from material taken from articles appearing in these and similar magazines. The favorite one with the class seemed to be the *Country Gentleman*. I asked them why they selected articles appearing in this magazine in preference to those in other magazines. The invariable answer was that the articles were usually more interesting than those in other magazines and that they were often better written.

Taking the cue from the class, I made further assignments for oral talks and sent the students to the better class of agricultural journals for the materials for their work. Each man was asked to pick out and read an article of special merit, take as many notes on it as he cared to take, digest it, assimilate it, amplify or digress out of his own fund of knowledge or experience; and thus, from the material, arrange and give a talk. The success of this modified plan was instantaneous. The oral work had been interesting before, but it became more so now. Given a basis to work on, the students made talks that were surprising. The plan struck them as favorably as it did me. At the end of the week, the written themes were handed in as before. Sometimes they were not much more than good summaries of the original article. More often they

were so changed that the writer of the original article would never have recognized it. The end of the term found the class still making expository talks based on articles taken from the agricultural magazines.

The next term I continued the same method, making the talks argumentative instead of expository, however. This, too, had its result. Two members of the class, neither of whom had ever had any experience in public speaking, won places on the tri-state debating team. Another represented the college in the state oratorical contest. This seems to me assurance that the work we are doing is permanent and fundamental. The reason for it all is that these boys have brains. The remark is made above that the brains of the college are to be found in the agricultural classes. These brains have been put to work in the right way.

This experience has set me to thinking, and out of it all has come an idea that I want to put forward to those who are teaching English to agricultural students. The modern method of teaching composition is largely by the analysis of specimens. Many books of such specimens have been compiled. I have said that there are no textbooks on the market, as far as I know, that make any attempt to furnish materials for teaching agricultural English. Furthermore there is no book of specimens that makes any attempt to contain specimens of agricultural writing. In the absence of such books, what I want to propose is the use of a good agricultural magazine as a sourcebook for the teaching of elementary composition to college agricultural Freshmen.

This idea of using a magazine is of course not new. Magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly* have been used for this purpose for several years with good success. What is new is to make use of purely agricultural magazines in agricultural classes. There are a number of the better class of journals that might serve such a purpose. *Breeder's Gazette*, *Better Farming*, *Country Life in America*, *Farm and Fireside*—even such magazines as the *Craftsman* or *World's Work*, that deal with many general agricultural topics, might be used. It is not necessary to restrict the class to one magazine. There might be variety. It is not necessary to use one magazine throughout the year. For my part, I prefer

papers of the type of the *Country Gentleman* because of the interesting quality of the articles and of their wide range.

The articles that are appearing in the *Country Gentleman*, for example, are not to be compared in merit with the classics. Who cares? They are interesting, they are alive, and they are written in the language of today. They are just the sort of articles that these students may be called on to write when they get out of college. They are as good as any of the sort that are appearing today. Then why is it not reasonable and sensible that these students be given a chance to read, analyze, and make use of them—imitate them even? If we carry out a method of oral work similar to the one outlined above, the material must be secured somewhere. Why not use the best at hand? If these students can be taught to write as well as the articles they may read or study, then may we say, "Well done, thou good and faithful student."

In final analysis, my plan for the teaching of English to Freshman agricultural students is to have each member of the class subscribe to some good magazine such as the *Country Gentleman*, instead of a textbook written for engineers or liberal arts students. Use this magazine as a sourcebook of material for oral talks, for analysis, and for criticizing. Develop the thinking power of the students by making the course oral as well as written. Have agricultural students and no one else in the class. Give more time to exposition than to any other form of discourse. Put an instructor in charge who knows the difference between a windmill and a silo. Then watch results.